The Avoca Betterment Club

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The ABC (Avoca Betterment Club) group was an organization of farmers and their families living in Avoca Township, north of Fairbury, between 1955 and 1965. The ABC club's Constitution stated that the organization was a group of neighbors who wished to improve the welfare of the people in their community. The Constitution also said the group would encourage, cooperate with, and work with any worthwhile community enterprises that would improve their homes and community.

Initially, the ABC group met once a month on Saturday nights at the Lodemia Hall in Avoca Township. Membership was open to farm families residing in Fairbury-Cropsey District #3 north of Route 24.

Lodemia is now a ghost town. In the 1950s, the Lodemia grain elevator operated on the railroad tracks. Lodemia Hall and an Avoca township shed were just northeast of the elevator. Today, the only thing left is the metal township shed.

In the 1950s, farmers had telephones and radios, and televisions became standard around 1960. Although farmers were using tractors instead of horses, there were still many more farm families in Avoca Township than there are today. There were few sources of entertainment for farm families. Farm families enjoyed meeting with their neighbors, and some form of entertainment was provided at the ABC meetings.

The twenty-four charter members of the ABC group included the families of James Goold, John Goold, Vernon Stephens, Vern Sanders, Howard Fugate, William Freed, William Frisby, Eldon Askew, Lester Perkins, Ernest Mies, Milton Harms, Kenneth Bressner, Darwin Freed, Warren Ernst, Glenn Bressner, Howard Wells, Cecil Ahlstrom, Mrs. Herbert, Gene Smallwood, Robert Link, Leslie Mies, Warren Ulfers, Walter Retter, and Jesse Brickey. Other families joined the group over the ten years it existed.

Each member family listed an improvement project for their farmstead. Typical projects included painting a house, mending a fence, tearing down a building, or planting trees. Once a year, a lottery was used to determine which family the group would help complete their desired improvement project.

If a farmer could not complete his necessary farming operations because of an illness, his neighbors would volunteer to plow his fields or harvest his crops.

The construction date of Lodemia Hall is still being determined. According to the Blade newspaper archives, it was in existence by 1931. The building had a large kitchen area and an elevated stage. The Steidinger family donated a piano, and the ABC group

purchased a record player for entertainment. Children of the member families would often sing, dance, and give recitations on various topics for entertainment.

The large kitchen area at Lodemia Hall was used for meeting events like pancake suppers and chili suppers. The kitchen also helped provide refreshments after each meeting.

Most meetings of the ABC group included a presentation by a member or a special guest speaker. Members would often show photographic slides of their family vacations. John Wagenseller traveled extensively to several foreign countries, and he presented slides of his trips. Local bankers, government officials, and local organizations often gave presentations about local topics of interest.

According to the minutes for the February 1959 meeting of the ABC group, "Mush the Magician," Reis entertained the young and the old alike with his sleight of hand and his musical selections at the piano.

John Wagenseller, a member of the ABC group, was a stamp collector and gave a talk about stamp collecting at the September 1959 meeting. Mr. Wagenseller likened the lives of the farmers to postage stamps and then gave some advice to all the members. He suggested that every person should set a goal, stick to their job, be dependable, take their licking, be willing to be smeared, and be great.

The ABC group also took field trips. Sometimes, they visited a member's farm to review a new or improved farming technique. Other times, they visited places like Honegger's Hatchery in Forrest, Honegger's Mill in Fairbury, Dwight Women's Prison, and the agricultural farms in Champaign at the University of Illinois.

In 1963, Charles Maley (1934-2009) was the President of the ABC group. That year, 27 families paid their dues to the group. In February 1963, Mr. Maley arranged for his mother, Frances Maley, to be the guest speaker. At that time, Francis Maley was the Livingston County Nurse. In her presentation, Mrs. Maley explained a new program that was being carried out in the local school system for "educationally mentally handicapped" students. The Chatsworth, Forrest-Strawn, and Fairbury-Cropsey school districts established a special classroom for these students in the Cropsey school building. Mrs. Audrey Honegger was the teacher, and the expenses were paid by the State of Illinois and the three local school systems.

President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, by Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas, Texas. The death of President Kennedy deeply saddened the entire nation.

Shortly after President Kennedy was assassinated, Bill Fugate gave a color slide presentation about his recent trip to Denmark. Before giving his presentation, Bill asked the ABC group members to observe a moment of silence in honor of the slain President.

For the December 1963 meeting, several children of ABC group members were involved with the entertainment portion of the meeting. Carol Mies performed a piano solo. Diane Bressner, Susie Frisby, Terry Ahring, Carol Mies, and Cheryl Stephens sang several songs. Recitations were given by Randy Freed, Dale Maley, and Willie Ralph Freed. Miss Ann Mies did a clarinet solo, and Kevin Bressner sang a solo song. The entire group then sang several songs to close out the entertainment portion of the meeting.

1965 was the final year the ABC group existed. Harvey Ahring was the President in 1965. The group held a picnic lunch at Bud Wink's cabin on the Vermilion River. Five families and three guests "enjoyed a sumptuous noon meal and then reclined in the shade to enjoy the little breeze the hot afternoon gave them. Several members of the group went fishing in the Vermilion River and caught some good-sized fish. This event marked the close of the ABC organization.

By 1965, many of the farm children had grown up to be adults. There were also many sources of entertainment, including television and movies. For ten years, the Avoca Betterment Club played an essential role in the lives of the farm families in Avoca Township.

Three farm children provide musical entertainment for a Christmas meeting of the ABC (Avoca Betterment Club) group on the raised stage at Lodemia Hall.